

Teachers' Understandings of their Relationships with Students: Pedagogic Connectedness

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Abstract: This paper reports on a doctoral study that explored the nature of pedagogic connectedness and revealed the ways in which teachers experience this phenomenon. Pedagogic connectedness is defined as the engagements between teacher and student that impact on student learning. In this study, twenty teachers in an independent college in South-East Queensland, Australia, were interviewed and the interview transcripts analysed iteratively. Five qualitatively different ways of experiencing pedagogic connectedness emerged from the data. The findings of this phenomenographic-related study are instructive in developing a framework for changes to teachers' pedagogic practices.

Keywords: Pedagogic Connectedness, Pedagogy, Teacher-student Relationships

TEACHERS PLAY AN important role in the lives of young people (Schiff & Tatar, 2003). While many young people form significant relationships with at least one unrelated adult, the unrelated adults they name as significant are teachers (Darling, Hamilton & Shaver, 2003). The daily contact that teachers have with young people situate them ideally to act as “influential figures and ‘significant others’ in their lives and to especially help those who find life’s circumstances stressful and a threat to their well-being” (Ostwald, Johnson, & Howard, 2003, p. 62).

The nature of teacher-student relationships and the quality of pedagogic practices (Lingard, Martino, Mills, & Bahr, 2002) are key factors that impact on students’ engagement with schooling. Individual teachers contribute more significantly to changes in student performance than other factors, such as school influences (Lingard, Mills, & Hayes, 2000; Rowe, 2000; Rowe & Rowe, 2000). Findings from the Victorian Quality Schools Project in Australia (cited in Rowe, 2000, pp 13-14) confirm that teachers are the adults who have the greatest influence on student school achievement (Osterman, 2000), irrespective of student gender or background characteristics. In addition to improved academic outcomes (Fraser & Wahlberg, 2005), positive teacher-student relationships have been linked also to improved social outcomes for students (OECD, 2005). In a meta-analysis of over 119 studies, Cornelius-White (2007) reported that the presence of learner-centredness and positive teacher-student relationships together enhanced student outcomes significantly more than if either is present alone.

Earlier studies of teacher-student relationships (Wentzel, 2002) suggest that students’ perceptions of teacher caring are related to the pursuit of social and academic goals. In the classroom, “pedagogic caring” (Wentzel, 2002) is characterized by democratic interactions with students, high expectations of behaviour that recognize and cater for students’ individual differences, and nurturance and approval. Teachers also demonstrate that they care by

providing lessons that are creative and interesting and through self-reflection of their classroom practices (Wentzel, 2002).

Recognition of the impact of positive teacher-student interactions on student behaviours and learning outcomes is not new. However, the establishment of positive relationships between teachers and students may be more crucial in these contemporary times of volatility, uncertainty and complexity. Teachers provide a constant in students' lives that are increasingly undergoing rapid changes often coupled with mobility, dislocation, diversity and global threats of 'terror' (Carrington, 2006). While arguably, warm, healthy, positive teacher-student relationships may be more important than ever before, internal and external factors may work against the development of these relationships.

Over recent decades, new and increased demands have been placed on teachers. Increased accountability measures, along with greater societal and parental expectations have led to the intensification of teachers' work (Ballet, Kelchtermans & Loughran, 2006). For example, parents, instead of being partners in their child's education, now often take on more of a consumer role in which they seek the best buy in education often imposing multiple, and often unrealistic, demands on teachers (Troman & Woods, 2001). While some demands are imposed externally, many teachers also place "high norms of pedagogical perfection and commitment on themselves" (Ballet, Kelchtermans & Loughran, 2006, p. 213). Several studies have shown that in spite of any additional demands placed on them, teachers persist in safeguarding and pursuing personal and caring relationships with their students (Ballet, Kelchtermans & Loughran). It is important to acknowledge that these relationships do not necessarily happen intuitively or in an instant. Teachers need time, skills and knowledge to develop and nurture relationships with students. While caring relationships in teaching may be a source of professional satisfaction for teachers, they can be a source of emotional strain, anxiety, anger, and disappointment (Teven, 2007). The development of caring teacher-student relationships may prove to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand leading to more positive outcomes for students while on the other hand intensifying the pressures of teaching. The first step in assisting teachers to develop warm, positive, healthy relationships with students is to have an awareness of the range of pedagogic interactions that teachers experience.

Aim

This research paper explores the nature of pedagogic connectedness and aims to reveal the qualitatively different ways in which teachers experience this phenomenon. Pedagogic connectedness is defined as the engagements between teacher and student that impact on student learning (Beutel, 2006). Thus, the focus of this research is on the mediated and relational nature of the pedagogical relationships between student and teacher.

Methodology

In this study, the focus is on describing and understanding the range of teacher-student pedagogic interactions rather than on describing and understanding individual teacher's interactions with students. As phenomenography is "an empirically based approach that aims to identify qualitatively different ways in which different people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various kinds of phenomena" (Marton, 1988, p. 53), it was deemed an appropriate research methodology for this study. Phenomenography takes a "second-order

approach” (Marton & Pang, 1999) or a “from-the-inside” approach (Richardson, 1999), in that it focuses on experiences as perceived by the participants (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998). In this study, phenomenography is used to reveal the variation in the ways in which teachers experience pedagogic relationships with students.

In phenomenographic studies, categories of description may be used to represent the findings. Categories of description reveal the different ways in which the phenomenon under investigation (Marton & Booth, 1997), in this case, pedagogic connectedness, is experienced. As such, the categories describe key aspects of the phenomenon and attempt to capture the character of the conceptions or experiences of the research participants (Richardson, 1999). Categories of description are delimited from each other through differences in key common themes or dimensions of variation. These dimensions of variation underscore aspects of similarity as well as difference between the categories (Akerlind, 2002).

Data Collection and Analysis

Trigwell (2000) states that the optimum number of participants for a phenomenographic study should be in the range of 10 to 20 and Sandberg (2000) argues that variation reaches saturation after twenty participants. Twenty teachers from the same lower secondary school in Queensland, Australia were chosen to be the participants in this study. The sample size allowed variation to be revealed while also limiting the large volume of data that needed to be analysed (Trigwell, 2000).

As phenomenographic studies seek to reveal variations in which a phenomenon is experienced (Bowden, 2000; Marton, 1988; Marton & Booth, 1997), purposive sampling was used to select the participants in this study so as to maximise as much as possible the range of perspectives of pedagogic connectedness experienced by the group of teachers. The teachers selected to participate in the study were chosen across a range of criteria that included: subject areas and year levels taught, gender, years of teaching experience, and the amount of contact time with students.

In order for teachers to express the perceptions of their relationships with students, they need opportunities to discuss their teacher-student interactions in depth. As such, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data in this study. Semi-structured interviews are the primary method of data collection in phenomenographic studies (Walsh, 2000). Each teacher was interviewed individually for approximately 45 minutes using the same set of open-ended questions with other unprepared questions or prompts emerging during the course of the interviews to encourage further depth of response. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed later.

The data were analysed using an adaptation of the iterative seven step method originally developed by Marton (1986) and outlined by Dahlgren and Fallsberg (1991). During the data analysis, the complete set of transcripts were read and reread repeatedly before any data were coded. Statements relating to teaching, learning and teacher-student interactions in the transcribed data were considered to be significant. These statements were highlighted and colour-coded in the original transcripts and then collated. To find sources of agreement and variation, the selected statements were studied individually as well as alongside statements from the other interviews (Booth, 1997; Prosser, 2000). These statements were compared and contrasted and the similarities and differences that emerged provided the basis for a draft set of categories of description. After the initial data analysis, the researcher met with

five of the research participants. At this meeting, the researcher provided each participant with a copy of their own interview transcripts and also presented the draft categories of description. The participants were encouraged to comment on the allocations of their transcripts to the researcher's draft description of categories. From the discussions at this meeting and further data analysis, the descriptions of categories were refined to form the final stable set of categories.

The researcher's subjectivity was dealt with by using phenomenological reduction (Sandberg, 2000). In this study, phenomenological reduction was achieved through the researcher describing what constitutes the phenomenon of pedagogic connectedness rather than attempting to explain why it appears as it does. Phenomenological reduction may be established through the use of "what" and "how" questions in the data collection stage (Sandberg, 2000). These questions direct participants to focus on what the phenomenon means for them rather than what it means to the researcher.

In the data analysis, all the participants' statements about pedagogic connectedness were treated as equally important. In this study, to reduce the volume of interview data to be analysed, the researcher removed only those statements that were duplications of the views already expressed by the research participants. If the researcher had viewed some statements by some participants as more important than others, this may have led to invalid interpretations of the participants' experiences of pedagogic connectedness. By treating all the statements as equally important, the researcher achieved reliability in terms of being faithful to the experiences of the participants.

Results and Discussion

The data revealed five qualitatively different ways in which teachers experience their pedagogic interactions with students. In this section, each of the categories will be explained and illustrated with data taken from the study. The categories of description of pedagogic connectedness are:

- Category 1: Information providing
- Category 2: Instructing
- Category 3: Facilitating
- Category 4: Guided participation
- Category 5: Mentoring

The categories of description may be considered to be a continuum that increases in complexity from the information providing conception through to the mentoring conception. Some categories may contain aspects of previous categories but extend meaning beyond those described in less complex categories.

In the information providing category, the key focus of teachers' pedagogic interactions with students is on delivering a body of knowledge in order for students to reproduce this knowledge in examinations. In this conception, teachers use direct instruction as the key pedagogic strategy. As such, the main flow of classroom interactions is from teacher to student rather than the reverse. In this conception, the nature of the pedagogic teacher-student interactions is impersonal with the main focus on teaching a subject through content delivery rather than interacting with students. A typical response from a teacher who holds this con-

ception is: “You do have to get through a certain amount of work within a set time...I’ve got to get the kids through the exam” (Interview C). This conception of pedagogic connectedness is similar to the factory model of schooling described by Rogoff, Turkkanis and Bartlett (2001). In the factory model, schools are considered to be efficient factories in which knowledge is an object that is transmitted from teachers to students with little acknowledgement, if any, of the individual needs and interests of the learners.

The second category of pedagogic connectedness is instructing. The key focus in this category is on instructing students in the acquisition and application of skills. Skills include discipline-based activities, such as graphing, cooking, and learning strategies, such as writing checklists. Skill acquisition and practice provide greater opportunities for teachers and students to connect pedagogically as the teacher moves from the isolation of the teacher’s desk at the front of the room to the classroom monitoring student work and engagement. In this conception, teachers engage students in a greater range of activities rather than simply copying down notes from the board. However, these activities are teacher-directed and are used to reinforce skills or strategies: “I start with what they know and then look at the strategies I can use then to get to that endpoint by modeling stuff like in English because there is a lot of modeling which is important” (Interview L).

In the third category of description, facilitating, teachers perceive the nature of their pedagogic interactions with students as facilitating student learning. In this conception, teachers focus on teaching students rather than on teaching a subject or subject-related skills. This conception, unlike the previous ones described thus far, focuses on a depth of student understanding with the teacher perceived as facilitating this understanding by engaging with students. In teachers’ descriptions relating to this conception, students are seen as active participants in the learning process and two-way interactions between teacher and students are seen as important:

The introduction to the unit might just be a discussion where they’re allowed to say what they think about these issues and get a really good idea of how, what they understand about the world and then we’ll look at research strategies and I’ll go along and help them find what they’re looking for. It’s pretty well they’re doing the work and I’m facilitating (Interview O).

In the facilitating conception, the words “conversation” and “discussion” are used frequently when teachers describe their interactions with students. “They’d be having discussions with each other and with me and I’d be going around talking to them. So, you’d have animated discussions, you wouldn’t necessarily have dead quiet” (Interview L).

Guided participation is the first category in which teachers talk about students assuming responsibility for their own learning. In this conception, teachers talk about providing students with opportunities to initiate learning experiences rather than the teacher providing the information or constructing the classroom activities. There is a definite shift from teacher-centred work to student-directed activities that delimits this category from the previous categories. There is a further focus also on the quality and depth of student learning: “I encourage that reflection ... how did you do that, and writing and talking about their writing, how did you do that? Tell me how you did that? That metacognition, very important, getting them to constantly think how did I do that?” (Interview G).

Mentoring is the most complex category of pedagogic connectedness to emerge from the data. In this conception, the focus is on the quality and duration of the partnership between teacher and student. These teacher-student partnerships are viewed as long-term, extending well beyond the years of schooling. Teachers perceive themselves as partners in learning and as significant others in the lives of their students: "I think they see you as this person who does go out of their way to spend time with them and you also relate to their parents when they're out there and so it creates an environment where, hopefully ... mum, dad, teacher and student are all working together in and outside the school" (Interview M).

Unique to the mentoring conception, teachers speak of their passion for teaching and learning and of sharing this passion with students. This passion extends beyond a love of learning to a love of life generally. Teachers share some aspects of their lives with students leading to a sense of vulnerability: "Passion is enthusiasm, and it becomes almost embarrassing enthusiasm where you put your personality on the line just so you can get your passion across" (Interview S). Teachers stated that these close interpersonal interactions with students led also to the development of mutual respect between teacher and students:

I can speak about my own life and I do my own work in the art room and the boys see that and they'll ask me what it's about and that then gives me a chance to ask them about the same things and I guess my relationship is like a relationship of passion because art is a passion that the boys see me living out and they know I'm enthusiastic about it and so there's a kind of respect for art that they show towards me, just out of respect of me (Interview B).

Dimensions of Variation between Categories

The categories of description of pedagogic connectedness were delimited from each other through key themes or dimensions of variations that emerged from the data. These dimensions are summarized in Table 1 and are discussed in this section.

Perceived influence on students

A key variation between the categories of description of pedagogic connectedness is the perceived influence on students by teachers. In both the information providing and the instructing conceptions, the perceived influence of teachers on students is restricted and does not appear to extend beyond the classroom. The main goal of learning in these conceptions is on instrumental learning: that is learning not for its own sake but to achieve some extrinsic goal (Lawton & Gordon, 1993). The goals are usually related to academic success measured by achievement in examinations. In the information providing and the instructing conceptions, teachers perceive themselves as experts who provide students, the novices, with knowledge and skills that students reproduce later to meet assessment requirements. In these two conceptions, teaching is seen as an emotionally distant activity with little recognition of the role of positive teacher-student relationships in facilitating student engagement or learning. Otewill (2003) suggests that teaching and learning should be emotionally charged activities in which it is appropriate to engage students by "appealing to their hearts and heads" (p.194). Hargreaves (2000) argues also that strong emotional bonds and understanding between teachers and students are the basis for high quality learning. However, it is not until the facilitating conception of pedagogic connectedness that teacher-student relationships are ac-

knowledge as integral to the learning process and teachers perceive that their influence on students extends beyond academic achievement.

Table 1: Dimensions of Variation between Categories of Description

Dimensions of Variation ↓	Categories of Description				
	1 Information Providing	2 Instructing	3 Facilitating	4 Guided Participation	5 Mentoring
Perceived influence on student	Academic performance	Academic performance	Academic performance and personal development	Academic performance and individual development	Academic and individual development and lifelong learning
Classroom interactions	Impersonal/emotionally distant	Impersonal	Sees student as a person/learner	Warm, supportive, mutual respect	Warm, supportive, mutual respect and commitment
Pedagogic practices	Direct instruction	Direct instruction and skill practice	Variety of pedagogic practices with focus on group activities	Variety of pedagogic practices with some student negotiation of learning experiences	Variety of pedagogic practices with student negotiation of learning experiences
Perceived role of teacher/student	Teacher as expert/student as novice	Teacher as expert/student as novice	Teacher recognises prior knowledge of students	Teacher as more experienced equal	Teacher as more experienced equal in long-term partnership with student
Focus of teaching and learning	Quantity of knowledge transmitted	Quantity and quality of skill acquisition	Quality of teacher-student relationship	Quality of teacher-individual student relationship	Quality of teacher-student partnership

The guided participation conception is delimited from the previous conceptions by acknowledgement of teacher caring and trust. In guided participation, the focus is on extending and challenging students, socially, emotionally and academically and encouraging students through participation in forms of appropriate risk-taking. Earlier studies of teacher-student relationships (Wentzel, 2002) suggest that students' perceptions of teacher "pedagogic caring" are related to the pursuit of social and academic goals. In the guided participation conception of pedagogic connectedness, teachers indicated a high level of pedagogic caring evidenced through their behaviours and practices.

In the mentoring conception, teachers perceive themselves as significant others who play integral roles in the ongoing academic and social development of students, both inside and beyond the classroom. As such, the teacher takes on the role of a mentor as defined by

Bronfenbrenner (personal communication, cited in Darling et al., 2003, p. 358). A mentor is described as:

an older, more experienced person who seeks to further the development of character and competence in a younger person by guiding the latter in acquiring mastery of progressively more complex skills and tasks in which the mentor is already proficient. The guidance is accomplished through demonstration, instruction, challenge, and encouragement on a more or less regular basis over a period of time. In the course of this process, the mentor and the young person develop a special bond of mutual commitment. In addition, the young person's relationship to the mentor takes on an emotional character of respect, loyalty and identification.

Poulson and Fouts (2001) use the term "affect attunement" to describe a sense of emotional connectedness and commitment between two people. Affect attunement in the classroom may be conceptualized as the ability of the teacher to emotionally connect with students and to be at one with them. Two individuals who share a mutual focus and who experience a sense of oneness exhibit the characteristics of affect attunement. It is argued that, through their mutual focus and respect, affect attunement is integral to the mentoring conception of pedagogic connectedness.

In the mentoring conception, teachers exhibit a passion for their subject area and describe how the "deep love" of their subject disciplines leads to a more intrinsic motivation. Ottewill suggests (2003) that a deep love of a subject may be expressed by a desire to share this passion with others. Significantly, Fried (2001) argues that passion is not a personality trait that some people possess and others lack, but something "discoverable, teachable, and reproducible" (p. 6).

Classroom Atmosphere/Authority Relations

Supportive classroom atmospheres are characterized by mutual respect and support between teachers and students, and among students. However, earlier related phenomenographic studies of teaching and learning (Booth, 1997; Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001; Samuelowicz, 1999) have not acknowledged the significance of the classroom climate to teaching and learning processes. Further, supportive classroom environments facilitate high quality learning (Lingard, Ladwig, & Mills, 2001). In this study of pedagogic connectedness, teachers spoke about the importance of these factors in contributing to student learning. In the mentoring conception, teachers perceive themselves as more experienced equals who consciously attempt to build an atmosphere of mutual respect and support within the classroom.

Repertoire of Pedagogic Practices

Direct instruction is the key pedagogic practice in the least complex conception through to a range of practices that include group work, discussion, and student-initiated learning activities in the most complex conception. The information providing conception has many commonalities with the factory model of schooling described by Rogoff et al. (2001). In both cases, the focus is on delivering a pre-specified body of knowledge through direct in-

struction with the emphasis on memorization rather than understanding. While direct instruction has a place in the classroom, it provides few opportunities for substantive conversations to occur between teacher and students (Killen, 2007). The dialogue between that occurs within substantive conversations facilitates understanding and leads to improved learning outcomes. Newman et al. (1996) and more recently Lingard et al., (2001) argue that substantive conversations between teachers and students are necessary to high quality learning. It is these substantive conversations that facilitate productive teacher-student relationships and vice-versa.

Perceived Roles of Teachers and Students

The perceived roles of teachers and students are articulated in a number of phenomenographic studies related to teaching and learning (Prosser, Trigewell & Taylor, 1994; Samuelowicz, 1999). In her study of conceptualizing teaching, Samuelowicz describes teachers as playing dominant roles in the transmission of information in her least complex categories and remaining dominant in encouraging and helping students to assume active roles in their learning in her most complex categories. In the information providing and instructing conceptions of pedagogic connectedness, teachers adopt a dominant position in the teaching and learning processes. The point of departure between the study by Samuelowicz and this study is evidenced in moving towards the more complex conceptions. In the most complex conceptions in this study, teachers do not perceive themselves as being dominant per se, but describe themselves as more experienced equals who negotiate learning experiences in partnership with students whereas in the study by Samuelowicz, academics create or “orchestrate situations in which students are encouraged to learn” (Samuelowicz, 1999, p. ii). In the mentoring conception of pedagogic connectedness, the relationship between teacher and students is near-peer (Lave, 1991) as teacher and students work together with a shared commitment to the social, emotional and academic development of students on an ongoing basis.

Focus of Teaching and Learning

Teachers in the information providing conception describe transmitting a quantitative amount of information to students. In this conception as in the factory model of schooling, the “learner has little to do besides allowing themselves to be filled with the knowledge provided by teachers and texts” (Rogoff et al., 2001, p. 6). The facilitating conception is a turning point with this category marking the change in focus of teaching and learning from quantitative to qualitative and also from a focus on content or skills to a focus on students. In the most complex conceptions, teaching and learning are not restricted to the classroom. Teachers speak also of the quality and duration of their relationships with students and their families and also of an intrinsic love of learning.

Conclusion

In this study, the most complex category to emerge was that of mentoring. The import of mentoring relationships between teachers and students has also been identified in earlier studies (Trepanier-Street, 2004/5). The notion of mentoring is not a recent concept. The term originated as early as 800BC from Homer’s *Odyssey* in Ancient Greek mythology. The

original Mentor had the responsibility of caring for and guiding Odysseus' son, Telemachus. Mentor acted as a role model, guide, facilitator, and supportive protector for Telemachus. In the mentoring conception of pedagogic connectedness it appears that teacher-mentors take on similar responsibilities. It may be argued that in these constantly changing times mentoring relationships are more important than ever before. However, it may also be argued that the demands on teachers are greater than in previous times. Understanding the ways in which teachers perceive their interactions with students provides an important first step in facilitating the development of warm, positive, healthy relationships with students. This begs the question, how can more teachers be encouraged to take on mentoring roles with students? Certainly, the ways in which teacher-mentors engage and inspire students through their own zest for teaching and learning warrants further investigation.

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